





There are still some wine frontiers left in Europe that have yet to be discovered. And Macedonia clearly is one of them. But now, 17 years after gaining independence from the former socialist federation of Yugoslavia, the republic of Macedonia is beginning to make a little noise about its wines: little, because the country hosts just 26,000ha of vineyards that yield an annual average of one million hectolitres of wine; noise, because even with the relatively low volume production, there indeed is something to shout about.

Once defined by collectivised vineyards that produced grapes en masse for Yugoslavia's gargantuan agronomic co-operatives, Macedonia's modern wine industry is seeing more and more private wineries being established and there is increased emphasis on producing quality rather than bulk. The country now has 73 registered wineries, with more than a third of these – most of which were founded over the last decade – specialising in quality wines.

Ironically, domestic consumption is a low priority, so much so that wine is Macedonia's second-most exported product, following tobacco. Presently, 90% of its wine is sent abroad – 80% as bulk (a major chunk is for Germany,

which prefers it sweetened) and 10% as bottled. But the drive for quality has fuelled an increase in volume – between 2005 and 2007, exports of Macedonian bottled wine rose by 75%, from 5.4 million litres to 9.5 million litres. And with that, export markets have been expanding. Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Russian Federation and Slovenia are the main recipients of bottled Macedonian wines, but recently more quantities are arriving in the UK, Japan, Sweden, Poland and the US.

One of the main forces behind Macedonia's quality push is its flagship variety, Vranec.

Planted in 21% of the country's vineyards, Vranec represents more than half of its red wine production. Although it thrives also in Montenegro, where it is spelled Vranac, Macedonia coddles the variety as its own, showing it off in an array of expressions, from light to full-bodied as well as an important component in blends.

Vranec is grown in all three of Macedonia's regions: Povardarie (central); Pcinja-Osogovo (east) and Pelagonija-Polog (west). Most of Vranec is found in Povardarie, which is responsible for 85% of the country's total production. Here, especially in the Tikves district, where Mediterranean climatic influences from the south converge with northern continental winds, Vranec yields →

WHEN IT COMES TO QUALITY, SIZE DOESN'T MATTER

Tiny Macedonia is starting to turn heads in the UK as it actively channels its resources into producing quality wine. It is going to be a tall order to get its wines a foothold in the UK, but as, *Darrel Joseph* explains, it is a region that is gaining international attention for its diversity



Wine is the second biggest export from Macedonia as more and more wineries improve the quality and distribution of their wines; above, the St Jovan Kaneo Orthodox Church in Ohrid

rich, ripe purple fruit with generous acidity and firm tannins. Although it is a high-yielding variety – often 40 or more tons per hectare – many of the new quality-focused wineries apply yield controls to extract more depth and concentration from the grapes.

“We cut our Vranec yields to 12 tons per hectare,” says Kiril Bogeovski, owner of the Bovin winery in the village of Negotino in the Tikves district. “But we are also experimenting with 10 tons and even 8 tons per hectare as well. Vranec can be very full, even deeper and darker than Syrah. In Macedonia, Vranec is known as a black grape.”

Bovin, founded in 1998 as Macedonia’s first private winery, grows Vranec on more than 10 of its 60ha of vineyards, alongside international varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. But it is Vranec that, Bogeovski says, “has so much potential and it should be our national wine ‘brand’.”

Jordan Trajkov, the chief of the Popova Kula winery, near the town of Demir Kapija, also in the Tikves district, concurs with Bogeovski. “I’m dreaming of the day when we see Vranec as the next big red wine,” he says.

Distinct varieties

But Trajkov goes even further with another variety, the rare, indigenous Stanushina, which is red, but produces wines which are rosé-esque in colour and flavour. “Stanushina is light and refreshing, like a rosé, but made with classic red technology,” says Trajkov. “It is very distinctive. And I want Popova Kula to save this old Macedonian variety, which was nearly killed off because of Yugoslavia’s mass-production methods.”

Popova Kula’s three-tiered wine range – Black Label and the premium Perfect Choice (both red), and a white wine assortment – are sold via winedirect.co.uk for the UK market. But for now, the winery, which presently works with 7ha, plans to expand to 137ha. As the company has gained recent concessions from the Macedon-

ian government, it is one of only a wineries which have penetrated the British market. While there are several other wineries, including Bovin, that are discussing potential business with UK importers, breaking into one of the world’s most competitive markets is a big task.

“The UK is a tough market, with probably the greatest label allocation in Europe,” says Goran Damovski, marketing and development manager of small and medium-size enterprises for the USAID AgBiz Programme in Macedonia. “But with the continued growth of small and mid-size wineries here, and with their focus on quality, I

“I’m dreaming of the day when we see Vranec as the next big red wine”

believe that very soon there will be enough serious quantities of wine for the UK market.”

Damovski points out that the aid programme, which is funded by the US government, supports Macedonian wineries seeking to improve quality and helps with marketing activities abroad to enhance competitiveness. Presently for the UK, discussions about an annual promotional programme at Vinopolis in London are under way, and the possibilities of bringing Macedonian wineries to the London International Wine Fair next spring as well as the collaboration with wine tourism programmes are being considered.

Of course, a practical if not cautious approach is maintained by some. For example, the Tikves Winery, Macedonia’s largest producer with 500ha continues to concentrate mainly on its regional markets such as Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia because, as marketing manager Iva Orceva says: “Right now, our resources are limited. And our regional markets are still very strong and bring more immediate results. Macedonian wines are not yet known in the UK; more market awareness is needed there. And that takes time.”